MEDICAL NUMISMATIC NOTES, XIX: A MEDAL OF GIORGIO BAGLIVI*

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A PRIZED item in my numismatic collection is a medal which honored Giorgio Baglivi on the occasion of the publication of his *Opera Omnia Medico-Practica*, first published in Leyden in 1704.

The medal is made of bronze and has a diameter of 40 mm. The obverse shows a bust of Baglivi in profile and has the following marginal inscription:

• G BAGLIVUS • MED • IN ROM ARCHIL • P •
ET • SOC • REG • LOND • COLL

The reverse shows a vase shaped like a tripod, with a serpent wound about its central portion. To the left there are a mortar and pestle, at the right a retort and other instruments. Arcuate marginal inscription:

• VNAM • FACIEMUS • VTRAMQVE •

Beneath is the date: MDCCIIII •

Giorgio Baglivi, born in Dubrovnik (Ragusa) in Dalmatia in 1668, was one of the most conspicuous and impassioned partisans of iatromechanical ideas. He was professor of anatomy and medicine and was known as the Roman Hippocrates. Appointed by Pope Clement XI to a chair in the "Sapienza," he taught with such brilliance that his lectures were attended by crowds of students. He was elected to membership in the Royal Society of London. He died prematurely in 1707.

His important book, *De Praxi Medica*, is filled with sharp observations and opinions.

One of the most important aspects of Baglivi's doctrine has to do with the study of the solids, to which he attributed absolute primacy over the humors—not only in physiology but also in the field of pathology.

Among his many contributions, special attention should be paid to

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Obverse of bronze medal of Giorgio Baglivi, diameter 40 mm., in author's collection. Original photograph.

his studies of fibrillar pathology. With Baglivi the fiber acquires a degree of importance analogous to that subsequently accorded by Virchow to the cell, as Berg has stated (1942). Baglivi considered the human body to be a harmonious combination of two parts, functionally and structurally distinct—muscle fibers and membranous fibers. The former, also called carneous motor fibers, originate in the heart and spread throughout the whole organism, forming the muscles, tendons, ligaments, and bones. The membranous fibers, on the other hand, come from the structures which surround the brain; they form the membranes, vessels, glands, and other soft structures.

Reverse of bronze medal of Giorgio Baglivi, diameter 40 mm., in author's collection. Original photograph.

The two kinds correspond closely to the two motor principles in the animal economy which Baglivi described. The heart constantly sends impulses to the carneous structures, while supplying to them a fluid without which their fibers could not move or grow. Baglivi explains the action of this fluid by a double mechanism. The blood cells in contact with the fibers provide a mechanical stimulus for contraction. Once the fibrillar action had begun, the red cells would act like ball bearings on which the fibers slide, facilitating their contraction or relaxation, according to the circumstances.

With respect to pathology, Baglivi accepts two types of affection, those which depend on excessive relaxation or softness of the fibrillar

structures and those which result from tension or rigidity in them. In addition, from the brain—and, more concretely, from its structures—an influence emanates which makes possible the normal movement and function of all the membranes and viscera.

In his treatise on practical medicine, the *De Praxi Medica*, Baglivi advises that the Hippocratic method be followed with respect to the study and observation of natural phenomena in that "the physician is the minister of nature and if he does not know her laws it is hard for him to control her" (*medicus naturae minister, si naturae non obtemperat, naturae non imperat*). For Baglivi, without doubt the most learned and instructive book is the patient himself. The physician must apply himself to the study and direct observation of the patient, not with theoretical arguments and empty lucubrations, but with the guidance of reason and in the light of experience he must tirelessly investigate the truth.